

Evangelical and Ecumenical Dimensions of Walking with AICs

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Three decades ago Wilbert Shenk, then secretary for overseas missions of Mennonite Board of Missions, wrote an article for the *International Review of Mission* entitled "Mission Agency and African Independent Churches." I was in my first semester of seminary when that article appeared. I was preparing, along with my wife, Jeanette, to respond to a call from leaders of the Harrist Church of Ivory Coast to serve as teachers in a new secondary school initiative the church was launching.¹ Shenk's article came at an opportune moment for us and pointed the way for much of what we would face in the next twenty years of ministry.

Shenk began his piece with an opening paragraph in which he recognized that "the modern missionary movement [had] been slow to admit its relationship to the various religious groups which [had] arisen in reaction to missions and their offspring churches." Referring to Africa's independent churches as the "stepchildren of the modern missionary movement," Shenk built on Harold W. Turner's then-emerging body of AIC research and noted the wide spectrum that existed among these movements, ranging from neopagan on one end to indigenous Christian on the other. Wherever these movements happen to be located on the spectrum, however, insisted Shenk, "they pose unique challenges to the Christian world" and "deserve to be understood."²

Before going further, though, it is important to note that the acronym AIC in the chapter title has been used over the years to represent African *Independent Churches*, African *Initiated Churches*, African *Instituted Churches*, and, more recently, at Jehu Hanciles's suggestion, African *Immigrant Churches*. We will simply use AIC for our purposes in this chapter. Nevertheless, the qualifiers "independent" and "initiated" will also appear with some frequency.

Early Learnings on How to "Walk with AICs"

Shenk's comments provided the background for understanding the AIC phenomenon and for laying the groundwork essential to any future ministry with or among these movements. A few of the observations one might take from his comments include the following:

First, AICs did not one day simply fall out of the sky. Their emergence was in some way related to—even derivative from—the efforts of the modern missionary movement.

Second, the nature of the relationship between AICs and these Western-initiated missionary efforts³ had not always been an amicable one. Quite the contrary, it had more often than not been characterized by the AIC's reaction to certain beliefs, practices, or politics of the missionary churches and the subsequent relegation of AICs by these churches to second-class, step-children status.

Third, the estrangement felt by the AICs came from two different, but related sources—from the Western-initiated missions themselves (French Catholics, American evangelicals, British Methodists, etc.), as well as from their offspring churches (the Congolese Catholic Church, the Ghanaian evangelical churches, the Nigerian Methodist Church, etc.).

Fourth, the dynamics resulting from these strained relationships could be quite different depending on which of the two groups was at the heart of the conflict. When, for example, an African church leader had a falling out with a Western missionary, the rift took place between an African and a foreigner (the American, Canadian or European worker). But when irreconcilable differences resulting in a split developed between two African church leaders within one of the Western-initiated offspring churches, the rift usually altered the local social and ecclesial landscape, dividing families, clans and ethnic groups, and reconfiguring the religious affiliations of these different parties for generations to come.

Fifth, the term "African Independent or Initiated Churches" (AICs) should never mistakenly be used to describe some kind of single, monolithic grouping of like-minded movements. In a 1984 survey, ten years after Shenk's *International Review of Mission* article, some 7,000 distinct indigenous movements were identified as existing in 43 African countries. Altogether they claimed at that time 71,000 places of worship and a total membership approaching 28 million, with more than 800,000 new members joining each year. Since then, the numbers have only increased. In the 2001 edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, African Christians identified as "Independents" were reported at 83 million and "Pentecostals/Charismatics" at 126 million. Combined, these two groups accounted for one out of every five Christians on the African continent, with 65 percent of these found in three countries, Nigeria, Congo, and South Africa.⁴ But perhaps even more important than the geographical scattering and sheer numbers of these movements was the cultural, religious, and theological diversity found among them. This was owing in part to the fact that most of them were entirely local and indigenously African in polity, program, leadership, and finance. But also significant was that each of these movements found itself at a different place on a continuum in the encounter between traditional African beliefs and practices and the Western version of Christianity to which they had been introduced. Harold W. Turner was one of the first to observe a spectrum of identifiable reactions to this encounter in movements he referred to as "neo-primal," "synthetist," "hebraist," and "independent churches." This meant that there existed a wide range of religious understanding and practice among these

groups, beginning with those only a step removed from traditional African religious reality and spanning the gamut to those communities focused on more Christ-centered, Spirit-led, biblically oriented expressions of New Testament faith.⁵

Sixth, the response time taken by the Western-initiated missions and their offspring churches to admit their relationship to these various movements was excruciatingly slow, and more often than not, accompanied by expressions of denial, derision, or disdain. Rather than recognizing the key role the modern mission movement had played in the emergence of these indigenous faith communities and accepting some measure of responsibility for their very existence and ongoing nurture, the Western-connected bodies considered them as stepchildren at best, and as prodigal or even illegitimate children, when pushed to express their truest and deepest feelings. Not surprisingly, members of these newer movements were treated as prime candidates for conversion and membership in churches holding to more orthodox Christian beliefs and practices.

Seventh, the day had come for a new approach to AICs and other religious movements, and this, for no other reason, according to Shenk, than because “they deserve to be understood.” Any such new approach would necessarily be motivated by the desire to listen and learn from the histories and experiences of these movements, not by looking down on them from some superior vantage point but by walking alongside them in mutuality and friendship as companions together on a journey.

Eighth, such an approach would most certainly be difficult to implement. In fact, predicted Shenk, these movements—given their complex histories, ethnic particularities, and almost endless expressions of diversity—would likely “pose unique challenges to the Christian world.” Multiple, contextualized approaches would thus be called for, requiring discernment, sensitivity, prayerful listening, and adaptability to widely diverse and constantly changing circumstances.⁶

“The Uyo Story” and the Beginnings of Mennonite Ministries with AICs

It should be obvious from the above observations that broken or at least strained relationships were at the very heart of the challenge facing the church in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa: relationships between AICs and Western mission institutions, relationships between AICs and Western-initiated offspring churches, and relationships between some AICs and the innumerable other AICs popping up everywhere at a rate too fast to count or comprehend.

The first opportunity North American Mennonites had to experience in depth these realities on the ground came in 1958. It was in that year that Mennonite Board of Missions received a letter of invitation to visit a group of African independent, unaffiliated congregations in eastern Nigeria who had heard *The Mennonite Hour*—an MBM internationally transmitted radio broadcast—and had taken for themselves the name “Mennonite Church Nigeria, Inc.” This cluster of churches initially presented themselves as representing sixty congregations with

2,832 members “under leadership and founder Rev. A. A. Dick, B.Th.” They requested resident missionaries for a Bible school to train leaders, for a high school, a hospital, scholarships for North American college-level studies, and for financial support for ministers.⁷

For the first number of months after this request was received, contact with these churches was undertaken and nurtured through occasional visits to the region by Mennonite mission workers newly assigned to Ghana. Within a year, a missionary couple, Ed and Irene Weaver, was appointed to pursue more actively a potential ministry with these churches. The Weavers arrived in Uyo, South Eastern State, on November 21, 1959.⁸

Their work began by acquainting themselves with the local situation. “That they were being called by a group of organized churches,” notes Shenk, “was a major clue that this was not to be a traditional pioneer mission. Just how new and the response that was needed in this unusual situation only slowly unfolded.”⁹

The Weavers were soon to make some interesting discoveries about the churches they had come to serve. They learned that, even though these faith communities under the leadership of Rev. Dick shared little in terms of common background and had virtually no history of trying to cooperate together, they had shared contact or communication over the years with a variety of Western church bodies: Pentecostals, Churches of Christ, Mormons, and others. Many of the members of these congregations had, in fact, once belonged to Methodist, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, or Qua Iboe churches.

In addition, the Weavers were to discover the scope of Christian mission efforts in the region. Ninety-five percent of the population was said to be “Christian”—an anecdotal statistic corroborated by a 1963 survey that revealed the existence of no less than 225 Christian congregations, representing forty-some denominations, within a five-mile radius of Uyo. “Never in my life have I seen a place so full of churches and institutions,” wrote Edwin Weaver in an early report back to the mission board. “Church and school buildings everywhere. Never have I been in a religious situation so pathetically confused.”¹⁰

Two groupings of churches had formed in and around Uyo. First were the established churches, the key players in the Christian Council of Nigeria (Anglican, Qua Iboe, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.). The Roman Catholic Church was also exerting considerable influence in the area but demonstrating little interest or initiative in relating to other Christian churches or institutions.

In the second grouping were a somewhat odd mixture of church and mission initiatives choosing largely to disregard comity arrangements and indicating no desire to cooperate with or even relate to other Christian bodies (Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Salvation Army, Mormons, Church of Christ, the Church of God, [Missouri Synod] Lutherans, the African Church, a variety of Pentecostal groups, and “many others too numerous to mention”).

Theological confusion and unabashed sheep-stealing activities reigned throughout the region. Writes Shenk,

A spirit of competition characterized inter-church relations. The established churches sharply criticized the indigenous churches as “breakaway

groups" in which individuals under discipline were received into membership with no questions asked. The indigenous churches complained they experienced ostracism and censure at the hands of the established churches and missions. The Weavers found these conditions distasteful and were tempted to withdraw.¹¹

Instead of doing so, however, the Weavers began to see a need emerging to focus in two particular areas, leadership training and interchurch dialogue, bridge-building and reconciliation. The first of these was based on the message the Weavers were hearing repeatedly from independent church leaders who expressed their desire and need for help in Bible-based leadership formation and for bringing stability to the life of their congregations, without any pressure to return to the sheepfold of the mother missions or churches from which they had migrated.

Likewise, in the second potential area of ministry, the Weavers heard increasing reports from Christian leaders throughout the region expressing grave concerns about the total breakdown of communications and relations between the independent movements and the older churches in the area. Whatever the past causes for these innumerable conflicts and divisions, there seemed to be a growing consensus that efforts should be made to seek reconciliation within the Christian community. This would, of course, need to happen on two fronts: in fractured relationships between Western-initiated missions/churches and the independent church movements, and between the highly splintered independent churches themselves.

Over the next several years, five different projects emerged under the Weavers' visionary leadership to build bridges of understanding between churches throughout the region: a scholarship study program, the Inter-Church Team, the United Independent Churches Bible School, the Inter-Church Study Group, and the Independent Churches Fellowship.¹² "Each of these projects," writes Shenk, "was practical and focused on acknowledged needs. Each one brought together people and groups who otherwise would not have cooperated with one another. The goal was to lay the foundation of trust and respect while meeting concrete needs."¹³

Building on the Lessons Learned in Uyo

When the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War broke out in 1967, life in southeastern Nigeria fell into disarray. The economy of the region was shattered, cities were laid to ruin, and hospitals, schools, and utility and transport facilities were confiscated or destroyed. The Nigerian government imposed blockades around Biafra, effectively cutting off international relief efforts and supplies. Everywhere people experienced a shortage of food, medicine, clothing, and housing. More than three million Igbos became refugees. During one thirteen-month period it is estimated that well over one million persons died from hostilities, disease, malnutrition, or starvation.

Edwin and Irene Weaver, along with other expatriates living in the region, were forced to leave. When the Weavers later applied for reentry to the country at the end of the war, their request was denied. And so many of the promising interchurch initiatives developed in the 1960s were abandoned, never to be reinstated, even when life returned to some measure of normalcy.

It is indeed difficult to evaluate this early experience in interchurch leadership training, dialogue, and bridge-building. Much of the documentation chronicling what actually happened was destroyed during the war. And, in any case, many of the initiatives and programs put in place were too short-lived to be given an adequate assessment.

The Weavers, in lieu of continuing ministry in Nigeria, remained open to applying what they had learned in Uyo to similar contexts elsewhere in Africa. For a six-month period in 1969, they traveled across West Africa through Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, and Dahomey (Benin), collecting data and meeting with leaders of both Western- and African-initiated churches.¹⁴ Everywhere they went, the problems seemed to be the same—"lack of communication due to past misunderstandings, mutual hostility, little real appreciation of each other and little vision for altering the order of things." Many of the people in church leadership positions, however, agreed that "something ought to be done to improve understanding within the Christian community and repeatedly Independent Churches requested help in training."¹⁵

It is impossible to report here on all of the interchurch ministry initiatives and partnerships that have resulted over the past thirty years in ten African countries¹⁶ from the Weavers' early pioneering efforts in Uyo.¹⁷ Some of the key achievements, however, include the following:

Articulation of Agency Policies. In 1980, the Overseas Missions Committee of Mennonite Board of Missions adopted a statement called "Ministry among African Independent Churches."¹⁸ In this document, the agency committed itself to a stance of fostering dialogue with AICs in four ways, by:

1. **Respecting people in their culture.** Every culture is a context for the Holy Spirit to do his work of re-creation. We are called to identify with another people through careful study of their culture and language, learning to appreciate their folkways and wisdom, recognizing that God communicates his love to each people through their own culture. We are not called to change other people's cultures, but to serve them as they seek to respond faithfully to the gospel in the context of their own culture.
2. **Respecting the churches present in a given community in their varieties.** Wherever AICs are found, the historic denominations will also be found. Each group deserves to be taken seriously, each one is a part of the network of relationships.
3. **Respecting history.** All peoples prize their history—the story of their founder, the vision that gave rise to their movement and continues to infuse meaning into their existence. We must be prepared to travel with a people into their past if we are to understand their present and future.

4. **Respecting ourselves.** We, too [as Mennonites], are a people with a past who witness to God's providence. If he has preserved us, it is for the purpose of serving and witnessing. In approaching another people, we do so aware of who we are because of God's grace. . . . Having been a minority ought to enable us to identify with those who have little power, prestige or privilege.

Inter-church Activities and Projects. Dahomey (Benin) was one of the countries the Weavers visited during their 1969 tour of West African churches. There they encountered Harry Henry, a Methodist church leader, who would later become the president of the country's Interconfessional Protestant Council of Benin. This thirty-member council of denominations, including many AICs, invited Mennonites to come and work with them in three principal areas: public health initiatives, community development, and biblical training for leaders of their churches. In the course of the next three decades, what these churches working together managed to accomplish is truly one of the most remarkable stories of interchurch collaboration anywhere on the current African scene. Five of their projects, among others, include: (1) dozens of community banks serving the most marginalized members of Beninese society; (2) an association of physically handicapped Christian women who operate a roadside restaurant to finance their evangelistic dramas; (3) Bethesda Health Center, which from its humble beginnings in a few rented rooms, has become one of the nation's most respected hospitals; (4) an internationally acclaimed garbage-collection and recycling agency that serves nearly two million people; and (5) the Benin Bible Institute, with its three-year program that has trained nearly four hundred church leaders from sixty denominations.¹⁹

Biblical and Theological Training for Church Leaders. One of the highlights of the Weavers' survey carried out in 1969 was the clear call to them from various independent churches in Accra, Ghana, to provide Bible classes for their leaders. One of these churches, the Church of the Lord (Aladura) Nima Temple, even offered its facilities to get the program up and running. Part-time teachers were made available by several of the participating churches. Initially, leaders from about a dozen AICs met weekly for fellowship and study. Serious efforts were made to create a space for conversation between the AICs and the older, Western-initiated churches belonging to Ghana's Christian Council. What began in 1971 as the Good News Training Institute has today, three and a half decades later, become the Good News Theological College and Seminary. Construction of a new campus is well underway on a site just north of the city of Accra. Nearly all of the teaching faculty—almost entirely Ghanaian—have received masters or doctoral degrees in their areas of teaching expertise. A Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program has expanded the school's reach through off-campus teaching centers accessible to more AICs. Work has begun toward accreditation of the institution's degree program with Ghana's National Accreditation Board. And the school's "Ten-Year Vision" for 2005-2015 calls for computerizing the facilities, constructing a library complex, conducting systematic research on

AICs throughout Ghana, holding conferences and lectureships, and launching a Web site and film ministry.²⁰

Pan-African Consultations on Ministry with AICs. In July of 1986, a group of fifteen to twenty Bible teachers, university professor-researchers and mission practitioners gathered in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, to share information about their experiences of walking with AICs at various times and places across the continent. The meeting, convened by David A. Shank and hosted by Mennonite Board of Missions, brought together people from a wide range of mission traditions (Roman Catholic, Christian Church, Mennonite, Swiss and Dutch Reformed, Baptist, Presbyterian, etc.) and academic institutions (University of Malawi, Faculty of Kimbanguist Theology, Good News Bible Institute, University of Zululand, etc.). All were engaged one way or another in ministries with or about African-initiated movements in sub-Saharan Africa. Subsequent encounters took place over the next few years in Zaire, southern Africa and Ghana, resulting in a network of people and a body of literature focused on AICs and (mostly) Western-initiated efforts to accompany and equip them on their journey.²¹

An AIC-ministry Newsletter. Out the 1989 consultation held in Kinshasa, Zaire, came a proposal to launch a communications piece for and about ministries with AICs across the continent. For over fifteen years, Stan Nussbaum served as the faithful editor of *The Review of AICs* (A Practitioners' Journal by and for the Network on AICs and Missions). *The Review* provided a steady diet of news from network members, issues facing AICs and ministries associated with them, and relevant book reviews and other resources pertinent to these matters.

Ed and Irene Weaver and Wilbert Shenk as their mission administrator for much of the 1960s could never have imagined the emergence one day of a series of pan-African consultations or a practitioner's journal linking a vibrant network of international workers from many church traditions, brought together by their common passion for ministry with Africa's independent church movements. Yet these too, in their own unique way, have proven to be an extension of that larger vision to build bridges of dialogue and understanding between the very diverse and sorely divided parts of Christ's body.

"The only justification for our moving into a place like Nigeria, with such a large percentage of Christians of varying shapes and kinds," wrote John Howard Yoder, administrative staff person for Mennonite Board of Missions in the late 1950s, "is that we help to decrease the confusion. In a sense," he added, "this is more of an *ecumenical* than a *missionary* task, if those two concepts can be separated."²² In fact, says Wilbert Shenk, commenting on Yoder's observation, "The missional could *not* be separated from the ecclesial. Such scandalous disunity was destructive of both church *and* mission."²³